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ABSTRACT

An analysis of Ohio's school choice options and the likelihood of their implementation from the conservative perspective is provided in this paper. The following issues are examined: conservative arguments for school choice; the extent to which conservative arguments are related to conservative movement themes; the extent to which conservative arguments threaten education; and the probability of implementation. Methodology is based on historical investigation and document analysis. A conclusion is that the three choice components of Ohio's Senate Bill 140 fail to meet the requirements of the conservative agenda because the bill offers: (1) no choice between public and private schooling; (2) no solution for funding inequities; and (3) illusions of choice. Ohio's educational establishment will resist the bill in order to justify its own existence, while the conservative agenda for choice questions the moral legitimacy of the existing system. (18 references) (LMI)

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OHIO'S CHOICE OPTIONS:
AN ANALYSIS FROM A CONSERVATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Ohio's Choice Options:

An Analysis from a Conservative Perspective

Ohio's Senate Bill 140 mandates that by July 1, 1993 all school districts shall have a mandatory intra-district school choice policy and that all districts shall adopt a yea or nay inter-district choice policy with all adjacent districts. Further, it provides for eleventh and twelfth grade students to enroll in full- or part-time courses at a state-assisted public or private college or university. On the elementary and secondary levels, the bill provides no choice between public and private education and no solution to funding inequities in Ohio where the richest district spends about $8,000 more dollars per pupil than the poorest.

In spite of the remarkably limited choice opportunities provided by the bill, Ohio administrators and educators began concurrently with its inception to devise creative ways to resist the implementation of the choice options and to creatively devise ways to assure its demise. This resistance is profound in light of the fact that even if the choice options are implemented, most Ohioans will not benefit from choice opportunities. Further, choice continues to be at the top of the national education agenda as President Bush and conservative legislators continue to endorse and advocate this policy idea for the nation's schools.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze Ohio's school choice options and the likelihood of their implementation from the

conservative perspective by investigating the following questions. First, what major arguments for school choice have been advocated by conservative thinkers and political leaders? Second, to what extent are the arguments related to the overarching themes of the conservative movement? Third, to what extent did conservative choice arguments threaten the education establishment? Fourth, what is the likelihood of implementation based upon the requirements of the conservative agenda?

The methodology consists of historical investigation and documentary analysis focusing upon the study of ideas as "an index to the history of...values and goals...hopes and fears...aspirations and negations" and expediency and applicability in order to trace out the conservative intellectual pattern regarding the issue of school choice.[2] The study describes the conservative themes, the education policy ideas or propositions, the rhetorical appeals, and the significance of the conservative arguments to the education establishment. The data includes primary and secondary sources including the public documents of selected conservative leaders including Milton Friedman, Ronald Reagan, and former Secretary of Education, William J. Bennett. Further, the documentary analysis extends to an investigation of the choice arguments found in Ohio's Education Commission 2000 report, *A Game Plan for National Championship for Ohio's Public Schools*--a study which preceded the passage of Senate Bill 140.[3] The study assumes that the origins of Ohio's school choice legislation and the arguments for

school choice are based in the conservative political movement in America--a movement which will continue to keep choice at the top of the national education agenda.

The study is theoretically based and utilizes Robert S. Cathcart's rhetorical definition of a movement. A movement is a rhetorical form in which one or more actors perceives that the established system is "in reality a faulty order full of absurdity and injustice" and "cry out through various symbolic acts that true communion, justice, salvation cannot be achieved unless there is an *immediate corrective* applied to the established order." Simultaneously, there is a "reciprocating act from the establishment or counter-rhetors which perceives the demands of the agitator rhetors, not as calls for correction or re-righting the prevailing order, but as direct attacks on the foundations of the established order. It is the *reciprocity* or *dialectical enjoinment in the moral arena* which defines movements and distinguishes them from other dramatistic forms."[3]

In *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, George H. Nash observes that during the decade following the Second World War a scattering of conservative protesters gradually developed a following and engendered an intellectual movement comprised of three significant strands. "Classical liberals" or "libertarians" argued from the themes of limited government and anti-collectivism; free enterprise, and individualism. "New conservatives" or "traditionalists" argued from the themes of traditional ethical and religious absolutes and anti-relativism.

Militant anti-communists argued from the theme of evangelistic anti-communism. This tripartite ethos, often at odds with itself, united around a common enemy expressed in the theme of anti-twentieth century liberalism, a radically different philosophy from that of classical nineteenth century liberalism with its focus upon free-market economy, individual liberty, and limited state power.[4] Conservative writer, Frank Meyer, expressed the belief that twentieth century liberalism emerged in Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and represented a dominance of state power over individual freedom marked in language and programs allegedly concerned with "the masses." Meyer described the enemy as "the Liberal collectivist Leviathan."[5]

In *Free to Choose*, economist and Nobel Laureate, Milton Friedman, argued for school choice from the themes of classical liberalism--free market, individual liberty, and limited state power. For Friedman, the critical issue was an issue of belief--"What's Wrong with our Schools?" Friedman proposed that the quality of schools was declining; that students and teachers feared for their own safety; that the increasing costs of education frustrated taxpayers; and that schools produced fragmentation rather than integration and harmony.[6]

To establish the cause of these problems, Friedman cited Walter Lippmann as authoritative evidence who some four decades earlier referred to "the sickness of an over-governed society." Arguing from cause to effect, Friedman asserted that "this sickness has taken the form of denying many parents control over

the kind of schooling their children receive." Thus, he established a proposition of both belief and explanation that excessive government which stifled parental control over their children's schooling was the cause of the problems of the nation's schools. He appealed to the emotions by referring to excessive government as a "sickness." He further supported this line of reasoning by arguing that the problem of excessive government had been worsened by the gravitation of power to "professional educators" and by the "increasing centralization and bureaucratization of schools, especially in the big cities" (ibid., 151-152).

Friedman, a leader of the conservative intellectual movement in America, since the late 1940s, assailed the education establishment. He argued that the historical campaign to replace "the diverse and largely private" school system in America was not led by parents but by government officials and teachers who pitched their arguments in terms of the public interest, who actually sought more secure employment, salaries, and "a greater degree of control if government rather than parents were the immediate paymaster." Thus, Friedman proposed that the rationale for the dominance of state power over the individual was couched in terms of the good of the masses. Within this context, Friedman indicted the American public school system as "an island of socialism in a free market sea" (ibid., 152-154).

Friedman chronicled the transformation of the public school system from its origins in communities concerned with equal

opportunity, through the consolidation and growth of districts, through the alteration of power from the local community to "the city, the county, the state, and...the federal government," through increasing professionalization of education. Friedman set forth propositions of relationship regarding this growth of government, professionalization, and centralization. He contended that as control by professional educators increased, control by parents decreased. He argued that as the size of government grew, the power of professional educators escalated, and the freedom of parents to exercise choice diminished. Escalating bureaucratization and centralization served the interests of union officials, professional educators and administrators and promoted their own special interests by reducing the power of parents (ibid., 155-158). Thus, Friedman's rhetorical appeals were populist in nature. He appealed to the "powerless parent" against the common enemies of big government, professionalization, and centralization.

That "those of use who are in the upper-income classes retain our freedom to choose," was perhaps Friedman's most persuasive and stinging argument for school choice. To support this proposition Friedman advanced two significant contentions. First, "We can send our children to private schools, in effect paying twice for their schooling--once in taxes to support the public school system, once in school fees." Second, "We can choose where to live on the basis of the quality of the public school system." Friedman argued that most inner city parents

could not afford to send their children to private schools and that they could not afford to move. Their only resort was to attempt to persuade the "powerful political authorities" who controlled the public schools--a "difficult if not hopeless task, and one for which they are not well qualified." Friedman found it ironic that the public school system, devoted to providing equal opportunity for all children, in reality intensified "the stratification of society" and produced extremely unequal opportunity (ibid.,157-158).

Friedman, once again argued from cause to effect, to establish that giving "all parents greater control over their children's schooling, similar to that which those of us in upper income classes now have," would improve the quality of schooling and "bring learning back into the classroom, especially for the currently most disadvantaged." Friedman contended that parents knew more about their children's needs than anyone else and arraigned "educational reformers" who assumed that parents, primarily poor and uneducated parents, possessed neither the capacity nor the competence to choose for their children. He considered this "a gratuitous insult" and argued that U.S. history established that such parents, when given the opportunity to choose, sacrificed remarkably for their children. Based upon these arguments, Friedman proposed the policy proposition of a voucher plan for both elementary and secondary schooling (ibid., 160).

The Ohio policy environment was ripe for the harvest of

three choice plans with Senate Bill 140 because the soil of national educational reform had been tilled since the "Reagan Revolution" of 1980. As president, Ronald Reagan kept the conservative agenda of parental choice at the top of the national agenda. The Reagan presidency, distinctively ideological in character, was allied with an organized, dynamic conservative movement which confronted the dominant liberal, political presumptions embedded in American political though since World War II. The conservative agenda set the terms for public policy debate and forced advocates of liberal arguments into a defensive posture.[7] As the first American president who was a genuine leader of a political movement external to the conventional party organization, Ronald Reagan was pragmatically committed to doctrinaire conservative ideology signified in the themes of limited government, free enterprise, traditional American values, and superior national defense.[8]

Since his 1964 national television address, "A Time for Choosing," delivered on behalf of then presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan brought national attention to the conservative movement through his rhetorical leadership. In *Revolution: The Reagan Legacy*, Martin Anderson, the author of Reagan's original economic plan, wrote that the political waves of the "Reagan Revolution" began with Barry Goldwater in 1964 when Goldwater spoke for dissatisfied Americans who wanted less government, more individual liberty, and more national defense. Anderson believed that "the rising tide of a new capitalism"

expressed in an enduring and "powerful intellectual movement... created the political momentum" that delivered Reagan to power.[9] Terrel H. Bell, Ronald Reagan's first secretary of education, referenced Reagan's "repeated appeals for parental choice through vouchers and tuition tax credits," and his support for "more competition for students among private schools and public schools." Bell concluded that President Reagan truly believed in "the value of competition and choice in education."[10] Further, Bell noted that Reagan acted as a "negotiator, compromiser, and pragmatist" regarding most education issues, but that on the issues of "tuition tax credits, vouchers, and prayer in the schools, the President made his position abundantly clear and left no room for debate." In Bell's opinion, Ronald Reagan truly believed that increased parental choice through tuition tax credits and vouchers would increase competition between private and public schools and increase the quality of education.[11]

In June of 1982 President Reagan submitted proposed legislation to the Congress entitled "The Educational Opportunity and Equity Act of 1982." In a letter to the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate, Reagan argued from cause to effect that the bill would increase "diversity in educational opportunity by providing tax relief for children who send their children to non-public schools."[12] Two months earlier in an address to the National Catholic Education Association in Chicago, President Reagan advocated his policy proposition of

tuition tax credits to an applauding audience. A basic issue related to need. Reagan argued the tax credit would be for "parents who bear the double burden of public and private schools costs." This argument was remarkably similar to Friedman's contention that parents who send their children to private schools pay twice--once in taxes to support the public schools and again in fees to the private school. Another basic issue related to benefits. Reagan argued the tuition tax credit plan would "expand education opportunities." Parents would be able to take a tax credit for each child they had enrolled in a private school. Further, Reagan argued the tuition tax credits would benefit the "middle- and lower-income working families" who were harmed by the current policy of having to pay twice. "Working families would be able to recover up to half the cost of each child's tuition." Reagan asserted that the policy was not for the benefit of the rich, but for the benefit of "lower and middle-income taxpayers"--those most harmed by "oppressive taxation." Thus, President Reagan linked the proposition for tuition tax credits to the overarching conservative theme of limited government and couched his argument as a populist appeal. Tuition tax credits would be another means to get big government off the backs of the common people.[13]

Reagan argued the plan would secure the advantage of assuring parental choice. This linked to the overarching conservative themes of the free market and individualism. Significantly, President Reagan linked the argument for parental

choice to the conservative theme of traditional moral values. Tuition tax credits would assure parents the freedom to choose a moral education. It would benefit "the families who still believe the Lord's Prayer will do them less harm in the schoolroom than good." Then, the President referred to over 5 million students who attended private and religious schools because their parents had "at great cost and sacrifice" exercised the choice to send their children to such schools because of "emphasis on values or the type of teaching available" (ibid., 467). The coupling of the idea of parental choice through tuition tax credits to the right to pray was significant. In latter speeches the President combined his agenda for prayer in schools, tuition tax credits, and the right of the unborn to life, and presented these ideas together. This was the "moral" agenda of the "New Right," rooted in the overarching conservative movement theme of traditional morality.

Of all of President Reagan's education arguments and policy propositions, the idea of tuition tax credits and vouchers threatened and intimidated the very legitimacy of the education establishment. The NEA reacted to Reagan's tuition tax credit policy proposal as "the most dangerous threat in the history of public education." Further, the NEA claimed the policy would endanger "the entire existing federal financial contribution to public education," and would subvert public education by diverting finances to public education.[14]

Anticipating this allegation, President Reagan argued that

rather than being a peril to public education, private education was an important component of it. He argued the causal relationship that "alternatives to public education" strengthened public education rather than weakened it. Alternatives produced competition and competition produced excellence. On the other hand policy-makers who embraced "uniform mediocrity to the rich variety that has been our heritage" threatened educational diversity. As competition decreased, so did quality. As taxes increased (bigger government), choices vanished. He argued that we must restore the "pluralism that has always been the strength of our society. (Reagan, *Public Papers*, 467).

In his February 16, 1983 message to the Congress, the President argued tuition tax credits would promote "diversity in education...the freedom of individuals to take advantage of it and to nurture the pluralism in American society which this diversity offers."[15]

Thus, the policy proposal of tuition tax credits, linked to the overarching conservative themes of the free market, individualism, and traditional moral values was compacted by the President into the extraordinary ideographs of "pluralism" and "freedom to choose"--inherent strengths of the American people.

When outspoken and confrontive William J. Bennett succeeded Terrel H. Bell as Secretary of Education, he articulated the Reagan administration's education agenda in a format that was more easily understood by the public. On March 27, 1985, he addressed the National Press Club, Washington, D.C. on the

subject of *The Three C's*--content, character, and choice. Bennett's concise style and masterful use of the media significantly contributed to keeping the Reagan reform agenda alive.[16]

Bennett argued for "choice" in the "Three C's" speech and criss-crossed the country keeping the choice ideograph at the top of the national education agenda.

In the "Three C's" speech, Bennett utilized causal reasoning to link choice to accountability. He argued that parents could not hold schools which failed to meet their expectations accountable. "Accountability could be improved if parents were able to choose another school--a better school." Thus, the conclusion was that when parents have the freedom to choose a better school for their children to attend accountability will be improved. Further, Bennett argued that most Americans (the non-wealthy), did not have the freedom to choose a better school. Like Milton Friedman and Ronald Reagan, William Bennett argued that the wealthy do have freedom of choice. "The affluent can buy the school of their choice by buying a house in the neighborhood of their choice." However, Bennett observed that most Americans were not wealthy and could not exercise the choices available to the affluent (Ibid.).

Bennett argued that in the some public schools children were not only not learning enough but that children were unlearning beliefs and values which had been taught at home by educators who disregarded them. Further, parents were simply not taken

seriously in some schools. Bennett deduced that "More than anything else, parents need to be able to choose environments that affirm their principles. They need to find schools where their own values will not be lost or distorted" (ibid.).

Like Friedman and Reagan, Bennett asserted that parents must not only have choice within public education but that they must have choice between public and private education. He argued from parallel case to support the argument. "It is ironic that the American system of higher education, with generous taxpayer support, provides such choice in the selection of colleges, while in elementary and secondary education which is compulsory for all, there is choice for so few." Bennett proposed that "All parents, not only the affluent, must be able to exercise greater choice in what, where, and how their children learn" (Ibid.).

The reasoning found in Ohio's Education 2000 Report, which preceded, the legislation of the choice options in Ohio's Senate Bill 140, was similar to Bennett's in that the writers linked choice to accountability. The underlying proposition of the entire report was that Ohio must boost its educational achievements from average among the states to excellent among the states. The plan to improve schools was to hold them accountable and choice was presented as a mechanism to make them accountable. Like Bennett, Reagan, and Friedman, the report writers argued strongly for choice, but unlike the conservative spokesmen, their proposals were meek. They proposed choice of "more than one public school," and that "every student should have some,

choice."[17] The report argued from both authoritative and causal reasoning asserting that making every school compete with at least one other school for its students by giving students and parents choice in the selection of schools to attend was a principal for excellence which had emerged from most studies of public education in the United States during the previous five years. Further, the report argued that competition makes people more motivated and productive and cited examples of magnet schools and recent experience with open enrollment as evidence that competition does increase productivity. The report reasoned from cause to effect that giving every parent "some" choice would increase excellence in education for Ohio's students (Ibid.).

The report anticipated the popular counter-argument that choice would cause a mass movement of students. The report argued that the historical experience of magnet schools and recent experience with open enrollment both confirmed that choice did not produce the mass movement of students (Ibid., 7).

The Commission 2000 report anticipated another popular counter-argument--that achieving competition through choice was a radical concept for American public education. The report offered five instances of parallel cases as examples to attack the counter-argument. In Cincinnati, any student can choose between the neighborhood high school and Walnut Hills High School. Also, in Cincinnati, students can choose between a number of alternative schools from the elementary through the high school level. In Baltimore, each student can choose between

a neighborhood high school and either a high school specializing in liberal arts or technical studies. In some Southern states, open enrollment is been offered in school districts which have been expanded by consolidation. Based on these examples, the Commission concluded that there was nothing radical about the idea of choice (ibid).

Nevertheless, after offering strong arguments for student and parental choice, the Commission offered the exceptionally weak policy proposal that "The Commission does not propose a total 'open enrollment' system, at least not without a great deal of further or careful study, but it does propose that every student have some choice" (ibid.).

The choice options of Ohio's Senate Bill 140 are consistent with the recommendations of the Ohio Commission 2000 report. The options simply offer "some" choice, and even these limited options are being robustly resisted by Ohio's education establishment.

In summary, conservative arguments assailed percieved injustices of the present system. First, the decline in the quality and safety of public schools was attributed to the problem of excessive government and the loss of parental control. Second, the arguments charged that the American affluent have to power to choose which schools their children will attend, but the poor do not. Third, the arguments charged that those who do send their children to private schools bear a "double burden" of paying twice--once in the form of taxes for the public schools,

and second in the form of fees to the private schools. A fourth allegation indicted public schools for undermining family values which were taught and home and for not taking parents seriously. The arguments were couched in populist appeals which pitted powerless parents against powerful leaders of the education establishment. Big government emerged as their common enemy. It was big government which had stripped away the historic value of American liberty to the extent that they could not even choose which schools their own children could attend.

The policy ideas of vouchers and tuition tax credits were proposed as solutions to the injustices. The proposed advantages were that parents would be able to choose schools which affirm their values and that choice would increase accountability, cause competition, and produce excellence. "Freedom to choose," "choice," and "pluralism" emerged as the notable ideographs of the conservative arguments.

These arguments were deeply rooted in the overarching themes of the conservative intellectual movement in American since the Second World War. Parental choice in schooling correlates with the libertarian strand of conservatism which values the free market, competition, individual choice, and limited government. Ronald Reagan and William Bennett connected parental choice with the traditionalist strand of the conservative movement which guards traditional moral values.

The arguments made by conservative "movement" leaders including Milton Friedman, Ronald Reagan, and William Bennett

were the arguments of a "true" movement as defined by Robert Cathcart. The arguments cried out against the injustice of the "system" in which affluent parents can exercise school choice but the working-class and the poor often cannot. The arguments consisted of "populist" rhetoric which attacked big government and the education establishment as concealing motives of self-interest in contentions couched in the rhetoric of concern for the poor and the disadvantaged. The policy proposition of tuition tax credits caused the NEA to fear that the entire fabric of public education was threatened. President Reagan cited a New York Times editorial which observed that the "mere threat" of tuition tax credits "served to jolt public education out of its lethargy."[18]

The three choice components of Ohio's Senate Bill 140 fall far short of the requirements of the conservative agenda. Conservative arguments mandate that parents must have the choice between both private and public schooling. Further, the conservative perspective requires that financial mechanisms such as tuition tax credits and vouchers must be implemented in order to make choice possible for the poor and to provide relief for the "double burden" suffered by middle and low-income taxpayers. The choice components of Ohio's Senate Bill 140 simply make available "some" choice. Actually, when viewed in light of the overwhelming resistance of Ohio's education establishment, the bill's choice components simply amount to "illusions" of choice. Nevertheless, President Bush continues to keep parental choice at

the top of the national agenda and the tidal wave of an enormous world-wide conservative movement which values individual choice and liberty continues to surge across Eastern Europe, the Soviet Socialist Republics, Great Britain, and Australia as well as America. Viewed in this context, Senate Bill 140's choice options are an omen of things to come.

Cathcart's theory of social movements helps us to understand that Ohio's education establishment will resist and seek the failure of the choice options of Senate Bill 140 in order to justify its own existence. The conservative agenda for choice questions the moral legitimacy of the existing system. According to Cathcart, "Those who would uphold the established order and its ideology must react and they must react to the threat of heresy and disorder...." (Cathcart, 73).

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